The Melville Society

NEWSLETTER

JUNE, 1952

Volume VIII Number 2

Tentative plans have been made for a meeting of the Society in Boston or Cambridge on Monday, December 29. Since the American Literature Group of the M. L. A. will hold sessions that morning, our meeting probably will take place during the afternoon, perhaps at three o'clock. The place: If possible, somewhere on the Harvard University campus. Neither the time nor the place, however, is fixed as of this writing. President Willard Thorp has given considerable thought to the arrangement of an interesting program and will welcome any suggestions. Suggested theme: A complete review of Melville scholarship.

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OFFPRINT SERVICE

Seventeen members have indicated their desire to institute a Melville offprint service and their willingness to pay one dollar each as a means of getting such a service under way. Since this probably is too small a number to maintain efficient and economical operation of the service, the whole matter will depend upon evidence of greater interest. The larger the group, the smaller will be the unit cost. Fifty offprints of an article would actually cost only a little more than twenty-five offprints.

Will those members who wish to join the offprint service and who have not yet indicated that fact please notify the secretary at once? Members will be informed individually by mail as soon as the number of those interested has reached twenty-five or more. Meanwhile, the secretary will appreciate being told in advance about any articles which are scheduled for publication, so that the proper number of offprints may be ordered.

It should be understood that the number of offprints provided for each dollar which a member sends in will depend very largely upon the total number of members who subscribe to the service. A minimum of fifty subscribers would be desirable. Twenty-five will suffice to start the program on an experimental basis only.

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WHALE ISLAND

Tip Rosenberry, the "roving reporter" of the Albany (N.Y.) *Times-Union*, has raised some very interesting speculations with regard to an island in the Hudson River, within plain sight of the Melville home in Lansingburgh, once known as Whale Island. Since 1915, when a dam was built by the federal government near Troy, this island has been under water; but in Melville's time it was a reef some 500 feet long.

Rosenberry has drawn attention in his column in the *Times-Union* to references in early Dutch writings to the stranding of a white whale (?) on this island in 1647. According to Rosenberry, Antonie de Hooges, then secretary of the Colonie of Rensselaerswyck, recorded in the official minutes of the colony the arrival of two whales, one of them snow-white, during a high flood on the Hudson River. Adriaen van der Donck, a Dutch scholar who later founded Yonkers, also mentioned the two whales in his *Description of the New Netherlands* (written about 1653). He said that one of them turned back seaward at Fort Orange, while the other was stranded on the island, where his carcass was boiled down into oil by the thrifty Dutch colonists.

The story of the stranded whale, says Rosenberry, was well known in the area even during recent times and could well have been familiar to Melville.

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NOTES AND QUERIES

To be published June 18: *Melville's MARDI: A Chartless Voyage*, by Merrell R. Davis. New Haven: Yale University Press. $4.00.

All members of the Society will wish to secure personal copies of the *Princeton University Library Chronicle* for Winter, 1952. This issue contains a complete catalogue of the *Moby-Dick* centennial exhibition held at the Princeton library last fall, as well as other interesting matter. The price is one dollar per copy.

C. Merton Babcock read a paper entitled "Melville's World's-Language" at the annual meeting of the Michigan Academy of Arts, Sciences, and Letters held on April 12 in Ann Arbor.

The editors of the *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays* (Tyrus Hillway, William H. Gilman, and Luther S. Mansfield) report continued progress on the volume. Though the manuscript is not yet in its final form, a book of ten essays and a preface is planned. Negotiations are still proceeding with an excellent university press.

Forthcoming in *Western Folklore*: "Melville's Proverbs of the Sea," by C. Merton Babcock.

Forthcoming in *The Pacific Spectator:* "Billy Budd: Melville's Human Sacrifice," by Tyrus Hillway.

Stuart C. Sherman announces that the Melville bibliography for 1951 is "virtually complete," and various possibilities of publication are being explored. John H. Birss and Gordon Roper have served as co-editors with Mr. Sherman. It is to be hoped that some arrangement can be worked out for an annual bibliography which will be available to all our members.

Dr. David Beres has been forced by the pressure of other duties to postpone work on his proposed psychoanalytical study of Melville.

Peter Gansevoort to Maria Melville, October 9, 1852 (from Albany): "Oh Herman, Herman truly thou art an 'Ambiguity'—"!!

David Randall, head of Scribner's rare book department, describes his discovery of Melville's copy of Beale in a dirty bale of books being sold for paper pulp, in Pete Martin's "He Finds Fortunes in Forgotten Corners," *Saturday Evening Post* for March 22, 1952.

Hugh W. Hetherington read a paper entitled "A Tribute to the Late Hiram Melville" before the annual meeting of the Colorado-Wyoming Academy of Letters held on May 10 in Colorado Springs.

Luther S. Mansfield was scheduled to lecture on April 29 in Albany (N.Y.) on "The Place of Melville in American Letters." Sponsored by the Friends of the Albany Library, the lecture constituted Albany's observance of the *Moby-Dick* centennial. The organization also plans to place appropriate markers on former Melville houses in Albany and Lansingburgh.

The following back issues of the Newsletter may be purchased by anyone interested at 15 cents per copy, postpaid: Vol. V (1949), Nos. 1-4; Vol. VI (1950), Nos. 1-4; Vol. VII (1951), Nos. 1-4. Earlier issues are no longer available.

If you have not yet paid your dues for 1952, your check for $2 will be most welcome. Reminders are enclosed with this issue.

In order that more copy may be printed in each issue of the Newsletter, the type has been reduced in size. An increase of nearly 25% more material in each issue was made possible by this change, which began with the March number.

One of the purposes of the Society is "to facilitate the exchange of information among Melville scholars." Are you engaged in a new piece of research, teaching a new course on Melville, or in possession of some newly acquired bit of information that you would like to share with others in the field? Although the Newsletter does not aspire to the eminence of a scholarly journal and is not interested in fully developed articles, there is room in its pages for more news about members and the work they are doing. An occasional note to the secretary regarding your activities will be very much appreciated and may be of considerable use as well as interest to other members.

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AHAB'S LEG

Which leg did Ahab lose, the right or the left? In Rockwell Kent's drawings, it is the left leg; in Boardman Robinson's, the right; and other artists have their individual preferences. It would seem, however, unless Ahab was left-handed, that his right leg was the one which was "devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmacetty that ever chipped a boat!"

The question may be answered by the fact that every whale boat had a thigh thwart (sometimes called a clumsy cleat) with a rounded indentation cut into it where the boat-steerer or harpooner braced his left knee while throwing the harpoon. It would have been difficult indeed, if not impossible, for anyone to throw the harpoon effectively without the aid of this contrivance. A left-handed man, of course, would need to brace his right knee; but the indentation on the thigh thwart seems ordinarily to have been cut a litt'e left of the center and was obviously intended for right-handed harpooners.

If Ahab had lost his left leg, it would hardly have been possible for him to brace himself properly in throwing the harpoon. The whalebone leg would neither have been strong enough nor have possessed the correct shape and resiliency to serve the purpose. Ahab must have placed his *good* leg in the indentation of the whale boat's thigh thwart and flung the harpoon with the arm on the opposite side. His whalebone leg, of course, might serve well enough to balance him in the boat.

Assuming that Ahab was normally right-handed, then, it must have been his right leg rather than his left which Moby Dick devoured. Can any member produce evidence to the contrary?

THE *Melville Society* NEWSLETTER IS PUBLISHED QUARTERLY FOR MEMBERS OF THE Melville Society, a group of literary scholars and others interested in the life and works of Herman Melville. The Society seeks to facilitate the exchange of information among its members, to stimulate the study of Melville's life and works, and to encourage literary, historical, and bibliographical research. Executive committee: Willard Thorp (1952), president; Eleanor Melville Metcalf (1953); Merton M. Sealts (1954); William H. Gilman (1955); Walter E. Bezanson (1956). The annual membership fee of two dollars includes subscription to the Newsletter and other services. Address Tyrus Hillway, secretary, Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado.